

## **Rural Revitalization Message Frame – for Rural Summit**

- A healthy American economy depends on a prosperous rural America. Rural America supplies much of our nation's food and water and safeguards our environmental heritage. Its role in establishing our nation's energy independence is growing every day. And our values are rooted in rural America.
- But today, our rural communities are struggling. And the challenges ahead are even greater. Government does not have all the answers but it can help create the right economic climate and provide infrastructure for rural communities to build towards a brighter future.
- The Obama administration is committed to ensuring that American's rural communities are vibrant and thriving economically. We made an unprecedented commitment to this revitalization with the Recovery Act, and USDA is continuing to work towards this goal.
- In 2009, Agriculture Secretary Vilsack led the Obama Administration's Rural Tour, visiting dozens of communities in 20 states in an effort to engage in a more robust dialog with folks living in rural America. He was joined by other top Administration officials to host meetings and events across the country, and engaged thousands of Americans in a conversation about how communities, states, and the federal government can work together to help strengthen rural America.
- First they saw a silent crisis in rural America. Too many of our small towns are struggling. Rural Americans earn less than their urban counterparts, and are more likely to live in poverty. More rural Americans are over the age of 65, they have completed fewer years of school, have more high school drop-outs than college graduates, and more than half of America's rural counties are losing population and with it, political representation.
- Second, on our travels we saw the strength and resilience of those living in rural America. America's farmers are the most productive in the world – providing food, feed and fiber for our entire nation, and making critical contributions to the strength and prosperity of the country. This productivity has given Americans access to a cheap food supply and provides us with 10 to 15 percent more discretionary income than much of the rest of the world. And agriculture puts Americans to work, creating one out of every 12 jobs in the nation.
- But here too the dynamics are changing. In the past 40 years, the United States lost more than 1 million farmers and ranchers. Many of our farmers are aging. Today, only 9 percent of family farm income comes from farming, and more and more of our farmers are looking elsewhere for their primary source of income.
- The Obama Administration and USDA care deeply about our farmers and ranchers and are looking to time-tested programs, as well as new approaches, to maintain a strong farm safety net for America's producers, a safety net that must include good-paying jobs in rural America.

- So while production agriculture must remain at the heart of the rural economy, we also know that to keep farmers on the farm we will have to build a thriving companion economy to compliment production agriculture in rural America. Our efforts to support farmers, ranchers, and communities in rural America must also embrace innovative new ideas for generating wealth on and off the farm.
- And our travels showed us that the elements of this new 21<sup>st</sup> century rural economy to compliment production agriculture are already in place. What we heard and saw from the folks in small towns is that they see more potential for economic growth in Rural American than at any time in decades. We just need to embrace new strategies to help create a thriving rural economy.
- The framework of a new rural economy will be built on a set of pillars which combine the successful strategies of today and the compelling opportunities of tomorrow.
  - We will create new opportunities for prosperity with investments into broadband access and by promoting renewable energy production;
  - We will create green jobs through recreation and natural resource restoration and conservation;
  - We will strengthen farm income by increasing agricultural exports, investing in research, connecting local producers with local consumers in both domestic and foreign markets, and helping farmers capitalize on new income opportunities from ecosystems market;
  - We will help the next generation of rural Americans prepare for a brighter future by investing in teachers and supporting rural community colleges to create an educated workforce;
  - And we will update rural infrastructure and improve rural health care to create jobs and ensure a quality-of-life attracts Americans looking for a good home for their family.
- When we are successful in our efforts – I know we will build a stronger rural economy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century so that communities across rural America remain the best places in this nation to live, work, and raise a family.